Does humanity need palliative care?

We have to learn to die not as individuals, but as a civilization.
Roy Scranton[1]

Although palliative care is becoming a major and respected component of modern healthcare systems, it continues to be difficult to judge when patients should accept the inevitability of their death and shift their focus from trying to find cures to increasing the quality of their lives. This shift sometimes enables them to live longer as well,[2] a welcome side effect.

Like a gravely ill patient trying to remain alive, our whole world is struggling to find a silver bullet. Our economic models are not working, our political structures are corrupted, our ability to respond and adapt to our rapidly decaying environment is wanting. We worry about the many threats to our civilization but seem to be stubbornly confident that we will find a cure. Pundits of all stripes peddle their solutions, their prescriptions. Economists invoke the invisible hand, the devout pin their hopes on the divine and scientists assure us that – given enough funding – they will find the path to salvation. They may all be deluding themselves, and us. Our proposed cures may provoke only more suffering.

What if our confidence is misplaced, and the world views we hold to be self-evident – the cultural views of our society – are facing the same multisystem failure as a terminal patient? What if our human world is terminally sick, and the problems we perceive – hunger, disease and poverty – are really only symptoms, while the real underlying pathology is the zealous overvaluation and overprotection of our current territory, beliefs, ideologies and way of life? What if it is time to face the inevitable? What if we admitted that human extinction, within a few generations, is the most likely scenario? What if our hope in the ability of technology to solve our problems is blinding us to its power to render us irrelevant and making us unable to notice how our tools aggravate our symptoms along the way?[3] What if we decided to leave the possibility of a rosy future behind?[4]

All would not be lost. Although we may not be able to change human nature, to cure the disease, we now have the technological ability and capacity to relieve those symptoms.

We have reluctantly come to accept our individual mortality and to embrace palliative care when cure is beyond reach. What if it is time to think of palliative care for our collective humanity? Perhaps by learning to accept the inevitable we may be able to use the resources available to us, and learn to make our remaining time more comfortable, more positive and more enjoyable.

Macro-initiatives

Futile and counterproductive attempts to cure may have impeded our capacity to relieve our suffering. But we are an ingenious species. We have shown that we can achieve more with less. In 2008, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimated that it would take US$30 billion in aid annually to eradicate

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▸▸ Alberta tar sands, Canada.
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hunger in the world.[5] As of September of the following year, we had already injected over US$17 trillion into the private banking system in an effort to cure the financial crisis – enough to save the world from hunger for 600 years![6] We can no longer say we cannot afford it.

We could temper our insatiable need for continued growth with its resultant inequity with a new age of frugality, or even 'de-growth',[7] as we did after the worldwide depression in the 1930s. The homeless could be sheltered with mass-produced affordable houses made with presently available methods.[8] We could pool a portion of our military expenditures and give groups such as the UN Blue Helmets the tools they need to enforce peace in areas of conflict.[9]

Local initiatives

In small areas, or even larger communities or regions, local projects are bringing comfort and relief. In Alaska, the Nuka System[10] has provided high-quality healthcare for more than 50 years by harnessing the power of First Nation communities. Over a million members of the Self-employed Women's Association in India have shown that we can produce food on a large scale without depleting the soil.[11] The Carbon Underground has shown that the Earth itself can absorb the massive amounts of green gas we have released into the atmosphere, if only we stop the use of pesticides and tilling.[12] Guaranteeing a minimum income to all members of a community was shown, as far back as the 1970s,[13] to have the potential to relieve the pain and anguish that will be caused by artificial intelligence and robots, as they replace workers and usher in the era of the *homo inutilis* and a growing 'useless class'.[14]

These are relatively small-scale initiatives. If they increase in number or size, we might be able to relieve the symptoms of our global pathologies. Examples such as the Neighbourhood Network in Palliative Care in Kerala, India, and those who have followed them in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and even Switzerland, show that palliative care can reduce individual and collective suffering even in relatively large communities.[15] The Compassionate Cities movement is promoting the understanding that 'care for one another at times of crisis and loss is not simply a task solely for health and social services but is everyone's responsibility'.[16] These cities are starting to spread,[17,18] showing that it is possible for large numbers of people to provide enthusiastic support to those who are reaching the end of their lives, and their loved ones, in their own homes and neighborhoods.[19] By adjusting their programmes to the diversity of local needs, at the appropriate scale, these initiatives could provide a model for the entire world.[20] If, while mitigating our suffering, we also prolong our existence on this planet, so much the better ■

"... we had already injected over US$17 trillion into the private banking system in an effort to cure the financial crisis – enough to save the world from hunger for 600 years!"

Declaration of interest
The authors do not have conflicts of interest to report.

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